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THE STATE-USE SYSTEM

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There are but two reasons why prisons are necessary: first, to protect society by removing the criminal from our midst; second, to reform the prisoner. Therefore any system of employing convicts that in any way curtails the possibility of reform is criminal in itself, and should not be tolerated in any civilized country, and yet a casual observation reveals the fact that most of the prisons of the United States have been commercialized, and that profit in the labor of convicts is the first consideration, and reform of the least concern to those in charge.

There are four systems of employment generally in vogue in the prisons of the United States, namely, the lease, the contract, the piece-price plan and the state account, all of which are vicious from a competitive point of view as from their lack of reformatory features.

The contract system is particularly vicious because:

First, the object of the law is to reform the convict, while the object of the contractor is to make money from his labor without regard to his reform.

Second, it is destructive of prison discipline from the fact that the prisoners are for eight or ten hours a day under the control of the contractor or his agent, who are in no wise responsible for their reformation.

Third, it renders impossible a diversity of employment suited to the different capacities of the prisoners and the conditions necessary to their moral training.

Fourth, it is the intention of the law and to the best interest of society that the terms of the best conducted prisoners should be shortened. It is to the interest of the contractors to keep them longer in prison.

Fifth, it makes impossible any proper classification and separation of prisoners, and places in daily contact the comparatively innocent or accidental criminal with the most hardened and depraved.

Sixth, the profits of the labor of the convict belong to the state the laws of which he has transgressed. The contract system gives those profits to parties not representing the state or interested or responsible except for a monetary consideration. This is a constant menace to the discipline of the prison and the reformation of the convict.

Seventh, manufacturers engaged in similar industries and employing free labor cannot possibly compete with manufacturers having the advantage of a prison contract, the labor cost of which is usually less than one-third of its real value.

For example, the Western Shoe Manufacturing Company has a contract for the manufacture of boots and shoes at the Minnesota State Prison at Stillwater, Minn. The total cost of men's welt shoes named in the contract is fifteen cents per pair, with no charge for the labor of new convicts for the first ten days. In addition the contractor gets free rent, power and light. The labor cost to manufacturers employing free labor is about forty-six cents per pair, exclusive of all overhead charges.

Thus, it will be seen that the difference in the labor cost is so great that competition is quite impossible. The above is but one of many instances where contracts of similar nature are in vogue in the manufacture of shoes, and what is here related will apply with equal force in many other trades, such as shirts, pants, overalls, and brooms, hollow ware and many other articles.

The contract system is condemned by employer and employees alike; in fact, it has no defenders except those who profit by it. It often happens that prison contractors are men of high standing in the community in which they live. They give liberally to charity.

The president of the company having eleven prison contracts in as many institutions is also president of a charity association and is quite prominent in the National Conference of Charities and Correction, and yet he is part of the system which is responsible for much of the cruelties that exist in all prisons that are operated for profit to the exclusion of reform. How true the old saying, "Charity covers a multitude of sins."

The most cruel tortures practised in nearly all prisons where the contract system is in operation, such as the whipping post, the paddle, the water cure, hanging by the wrists and many other methods equally cruel are administered for no reason except that the

prisoner has failed to satisfy the contractor in the amount of work performed.

Not only is reform impossible under such treatment, but the prisoner is bound to become more criminally inclined. Life does not stand still, even in prison. The man who grows no better must steadily grow worse, and so our prisons are becoming confirmatories instead of reformatories, as originally intended.

Nearly half a million persons are sent to prison every year in the United States. Most of these people are not really criminals; most of them are first offenders. They have blundered, but they are human and surely they deserve a chance to make amends for the wrong they have done. Give them a chance and many of them will reform.

The only system of employing convicts that appears in any way commendable to the writer is that system which most effectively protects the moral and material interests of society, regardless of pecuniary profit, and improves the morals and material opportunities of the prisoners.

Such a system has been in operation for a number of years in the New York state prisons located in Sing Sing, Auburn and Clinton. In these prisons there are twenty-four different industries engaged in the manufacture of articles for use in state institutions and political divisions thereof.

The system has proved an unqualified success and merits extension to all penal institutions in the state and country. No institution supported wholly or partially by the state should be allowed to purchase a single article in the open market that can be supplied by the prisons. This would give employment to diversified prison industries and occupations, and fit the prisoners to procure and perform lucrative labor at the expiration of their prison terms. It would fit them to earn a living by an honest trade instead of gaining one by one or another of the various forms of crime which their industrial inability and consequent cheap labor value lead them to embrace. Hence the value of diversified prison industries and occupations conducted under the most improved methods and with up-to-date machinery.

The New York system has produced positive results that cannot be disregarded and merits the serious consideration of every student of prison reforms and society in general.

It has abolished all inhuman systems of cruelty practised under the guise of punishment, which are common in institutions in other states, and has removed prison administration from the field of money corruption and practically made graft an impossibility.

The New York system has abolished competition in the open market between free and convict labor. This is of widespread importance to free labor, free institutions and in fact to freedom itself. It is the entering wedge that will eventually overthrow and completely destroy the convict contract system with its attendant chain of evils. It reforms the prisoner and reinstates him in his social rights and workday opportunities. It straightens and broadens his vision and inspires him with the blessing of honest, industrious citizenship of the most incalculable benefit and essential to the higher, deeper and fuller development of civilization.